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ARAMAIC DOCUMENTS IN EZRA

The alleged Persian documents in Ezra have been widely accepted as authentic in English-speaking scholarship.¹ This has not necessarily been the case in German-language scholarship where the authenticity has often been doubted.² The skepticism in some recent

¹For a sampling of opinion, see J. M. Myers, *Ezra, Nehemiah* (AB 14; Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1965); L. W. Batten, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Ezra and Nehemiah* (ICC; Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1913); D. J. A. Clines, *Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther* (CBC; London: Marshall, Morgan & Scott; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984); H. G. M. Williamson, *Ezra, Nehemiah* (WBC 16; Waco, TX: Word Books, 1985); G. Widengren, 'The Persian Period', *Israelite and Judaeon History* (ed. J. Hayes and J. Miller; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1977) 489-538; cf. also J. Blenkinsopp, *Ezra-Nehemiah* (OTL; London: SCM, 1989), though his opinion is much more nuanced.

²See, for example, A. H. J. Gunneweg, *Esra* (KAT 19.1; Gütersloh: Mohn, 1985); L. C. H. Lebram, 'Die Traditionsgeschichte der Ezragestalt und die Frage nach dem historischen Esra', in H. Sancisi-Weerdenburg (ed.), *Achaemenid History I: Sources, Structures and Synthesis* (Proceeding of the Groningen 1983 Achaemenid History Workshop; Leiden: Nederlands Instituut voor het Nabije Oosten, 1987)

literature is a good reason to reopen the question, if indeed it was ever closed.³

The documents to be examined are the letter to Artaxerxes (Ezra 4:8-16), the reply of Artaxerxes (4:17-22), the letter of Tattenai and Shether-bozenai to Darius (5:7-17), the memorandum in the reign of Cyrus (6:2-5), the reply of Darius (6:6-12), and the decree of Artaxerxes to Ezra (7:12-26). This can be only a preliminary investigation--a 'trial cut'--while a full-scale study would need to be much more detailed and examine all criteria rather than the handful which is all that can be looked at here.

Criteria for Judging Authenticity

Three main points will be considered, though this is not intended to be exhaustive: (1) parallel documents from the Persian period, (2) the language of the Ezra documents, and (3) the contents of the documents.

(1) Parallel Persian Documents

This point is mainly negative: parallel sources to use in making a proper comparison are very skimpy. The documents of Ezra are all allegedly official Persian documents, four of the six being royal decrees. For parallel documents we have some letters by Persian officials: in Aramaic is the Arsames correspondence⁴; we also have some

103-38. An exception to this is W. Rudolph, *Esra und Nehemia* (HAT 20; Tübingen: Mohr[Siebeck], 1949) who accepts them as genuine.

³See my recent call for the question to be thoroughly investigated in *Judaism from Cyrus to Hadrian* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992) 32-36.

⁴G. R. Driver, *Aramaic Documents of the Fifth Century B.C.*

material in Egyptian.⁵ When it comes to royal decrees, we have the Cyrus Cylinder in Akkadian⁶; the Behistun inscription in Persian and Elamite, as well as translations⁷; and apparently an authentic letter of Xerxes in Greek in Thucydides.⁸ Other alleged royal decrees in Greek are inauthentic, such as some documents in Herodotus,⁹ or are of

(revised ed.; Oxford: Clarendon, 1957).

5G. R. Hughes, 'The So-called Pherendates Correspondence', *Grammata Demotika: Festschrift für Erich Lüddeckens zum 15. Juni 1983* (ed. H.-J. Thissen and K.-T. Zauzich; Würzburg: Zauzich, 1984) 75-86; W. Spiegelberg, 'Drei demotische Schreiben aus der Korrespondenz des Pherendates, des Satrapen Darius' I., mit den Chnum-Priestern von Elephantine', *SPAW, phil.-hist. Klasse* (1928) 604-22.

6See especially P.-R. Berger, 'Der Kyros-Zylinder mit dem Zusatzfragment BIN II Nr. 32 und die akkadischen Personennamen im Danielbuch', *ZA* 64 (1975) 192-234.

7It is debatable whether the original was the Persian or the Elamite version. For the Persian text, see R. G. Kent, *Old Persian* (2nd ed.; AOS 33; New Haven: American Oriental Society, 1953). The Elamite text is given in transliteration in F. H. Weissbach, *Die Keilinschriften der Achämeniden* (VAB 3; Leipzig: Hinrichs, 1911; reprinted Leipzig: Zentral-Antiquariat der DDR, 1968). The Babylonian text is given by E. N. von Voigtlander, *The Behistun Inscription of Darius the Great. Babylonian Version* (Corpus Inscriptionum Iranicarum, Part I: Inscriptions of Ancient Iran, Vol. II: The Babylonian Versions of the Achaemenian Inscriptions, Texts I; London: Humphries, 1978). Fragments of an Aramaic version are edited by J. C. Greenfield and B. Porten, *The Bisitun Inscription of Darius the Great: Aramaic Version* (Corpus Inscriptionum Iranicarum, Part I: Inscriptions of Ancient Iran, Vol. V: The Aramaic Versions of the Achaemenian Inscriptions, Texts I; London: Humphries, 1982).

8Thucydides 1.128-29. See also A. T. Olmstead, 'A Persian

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doubtful authenticity, such as the Gadatas inscription.¹⁰ It is very important to recognize that *we have not a single document in Aramaic to compare with the four alleged royal decrees in Ezra*. Thus, to demonstrate the genuine or non-genuine nature of these alleged Persian documents is made much more difficult.

(2) Language of the Ezra Documents

If the Aramaic passages in Ezra are taken as they stand, from a linguistic point of view they are almost certainly not from the Achaemenid period. For example, the documents of Ezra all use *dy* as the relative pronoun and sign of the genitive. There are only a few sporadic uses of *dy* in any documents from the Achaemenid period,¹¹ and no known document from the Persian administration has anything but *zy*.

Letter in Thucydides', *AJSL* 49 (1933) 161ff.

⁹This includes the letters in Herodotus 1.123; 3.40, 128; 5.14, 35; 6.4; 7.239; 8.22, 128. See further M. van den Hout, 'Studies in Early Greek Letter-Writing', *Mnemosyne* 2 (4th series) (1949) 19-41, 138-53.

¹⁰The preserved inscription is from the 2nd century of the common era, long after the Persian period, and in Hellenistic Greek rather than the expected Ionic. Thus, to maintain authenticity requires that one argue for a late copy and translation from one Greek dialect to another. A recent argument against its authenticity is O. Hansen, 'The Purported Letter of Darius to Gadatas', *Rheinisches Museon* 129 (1986) 95-96. He is opposed by J. Wiesehöfer, 'Zur Frage der Echtheit des Dareios-Briefes an Gadatas', *Reinisches Museon* 130 (1987) 396-98, who argues that it is authentic.

¹¹E.g., Cowley 13.7, 11, 16; Kraeling 3.12; 12.30, 31. These few occurrences are in documents which normally and overwhelming use the *zy* orthography.

Yet when the Aramaic of the Greek period (that is, Standard Literary Aramaic,¹² such as we find in Daniel) is examined, the language of the Ezra documents definitely looks earlier. This paper limits itself specifically to the 2nd and 3rd person plural pronominal suffixes. In all official Achaemenid documents known so far, they are consistently *-km* and *-hm*. In Daniel, however, we find consistently *-kwn* and *-hwn*. The latter forms are also found sporadically in material from Persian Egypt,¹³ though the papyri in which they mostly occur represent a Syrian form of the language.¹⁴

(3) Contents of the Ezra Documents

The contents are vital for a proper investigation of the question, yet they are the hardest to tackle. With the scarcity of information about the Persian period, many questions of custom, administration, scribal practice, and cultic convention cannot be answered with certainty. Nevertheless, we must weight matters in the light of probability. For example, we find that no less than three of the documents, from three separate periods of time, allege that the Persian

¹²This term was coined by J. C. Greenfield, 'Standard Literary Aramaic', in A. Caquot and D. Cohen (ed.), *Actes du Premier Congrès international de linguistique sémitique et chamito-sémitique, Paris 16-19 juillet 1969* (Janua Linguarum, Series Practica 159; Hague: Mouton, 1974) 280-89. It is the successor to Imperial Aramaic and tends to have many of the latter's characteristics.

¹³Especially in the Hermopolis papyri, e.g., 1.3; 2.10; 5.9; 8.9; also Cowley 16.4; 34.6-7; 37.4, 14; 82.11; Kraeling 12.19, 21. It should be noted that these are always spelled *-kn* and *-hn* (i.e., without the vowel letter *waw* which is normal in Standard Literary Aramaic).

¹⁴See E. Y. Kutscher, 'The Hermopolis Papyri', *IOS* 1 (1971) 103-19, especially p. 109.

government financed Jewish activities. One such document might be credible, two could perhaps be stomached, but three are hard to swallow, especially when in some cases enormous sums of money are entailed.

A further point concerns the Persian attitude to local religions. It has often been asserted that the Persian government promoted local cults.¹⁵ While the Persians were generally tolerant of local cults, this was also the case with the Assyrians and Babylonians. But the idea that the Persian administration actually fostered local cults seems based on these very documents which may represent only Jewish propaganda. On the contrary, the Persians tolerated but also taxed the local shrines and temples.¹⁶ Far from contributing funds to them, the

15R. de Vaux, 'The Decrees of Cyrus and Darius on the Rebuilding of the Temple', *Bible and the Ancient Near East* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1971) 63-96 (= translation of *RB* 46 [1937] 29-57), quote from pp. 77-78. Cf. J. Blenkinsopp, 'The Mission of Udjahorresnet and Those of Ezra and Nehemiah', *JBL* 106 (1987) 409-21, esp. 413.

16M. A. Dandamaev and V. G. Lukonin, *The Culture and Social Institutions of Ancient Iran* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1989) 362-66; C. Tuplin, 'Administration of the Achaemenid Empire', in I. Carradice (ed.), *Coinage and Administration in the Athenian and Persian Empires: The Ninth Oxford Symposium on Coinage and Monetary History* (BAR International Series 343; Oxford: B.A.R., 1987) 149-53; S. Hornblower, *Mausolus* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1982) 161-63; G. Posener, *La première domination perse en Egypte* (Bibliothèque d'Etude de l'Institut Français d'Archeologie Orientale, 11; Cairo: Institut Français d'Archeologie Orientale, 1936) 164-76. Some documents of the Persepolis Treasury and Fortification Texts mention the issuance of rations for cultic purposes. These appear to be for priests of the official cult, even if sometimes the actual offering was for an older Elamite

administration made sure that non-state cults paid their way, especially when they had been powerful centers of vested interests in the past.¹⁷ The Jews might be given permission to revive the Jerusalem cult, but it is not likely that they were given imperial funds with which to do it.

The Documents

This section will go through each document in some detail, looking at the specified linguistic criteria and also the contents which seem relevant to authenticity:

Document 1 (4:9(?)-16): Letter to Artaxerxes

The problem with this letter is the confused nature of the text, which makes it difficult to know where it starts. It seems to begin three different times (vv 8, 9, 11), yet the expected greeting to the king (which god. See especially H. Koch, *Die religiösen Verhältnisse der Dareioszeit: Untersuchungen an Hand der elamischen Persepolistäfelchen* (Göttinger Orientforschungen, III Reihe: Iranica, Band 4; Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1977) 175-77; cf. G. G. Cameron, *Persepolis Treasury Tablets* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1948) 5-9 and texts 10-11. The relevant texts are listed by Koch; for an edition of all the Fortification texts, see R. T. Hallock, *Persepolis Fortification Tablets* (Chicago: University, 1969); see especially texts 336-77, 741-74.

¹⁷For example, the cults of certain temples in Egypt, according to the Demotic Chronicle: W. Spiegelberg, *Die sogenannte demotische Chronik des Pap. 215 der Bibliothek Nationale zu Paris; nebst den auf der Rückseite des Papyrus stehenden Texten* (Demotische Studien 7; Leipzig: Hinrichs, 1914) 32-33. For examples from Mesopotamia, see Tuplin, 'The Administration of the Achaemenid Empire', 109-66, esp. 150.

should come in either v 11 or v 12) is absent. Furthermore, two late forms occur in 4:9 (*kěnwāthôn*, *dehāwē*). This seems quite important if v 9 is a part of the text of the letter, but the confused nature of the material makes it difficult to be sure that the verse is a part of the original letter. A further problem is the form *malkîm* (v 13) which looks suspiciously Hebrew. In addition, this letter sounds rude when compared with Document 3. Thus, it is very difficult to judge even though the situation is not unbelievable in itself.

Document 2 (4:17-22): Reply of Artaxerxes

Two late forms occur in this letter, in 4:17 (*kěnwāthôn*) and in 4:20 (*lēhôn*). In addition, several other points suggest that this is either a fictitious document or one which has been worked over by later Jewish scribes. It is doubtful whether the Persian archives would have had any mention of Mesopotamian interaction with Judah. That question apart, however, 4:20 states that mighty kings who ruled over Jerusalem also ruled over all Abar-Nahara and tribute was paid to them. This is patently untrue, since no Jewish kings ruled over Abar-Nahara and collected tribute from it, and it is incredible that such information was found in the archives available to the Persians. This portion of the document, at least, looks like Jewish propaganda, pure and simple.

Document 3 (5:7-17): Letter of Tattenai

All forms in this letter are early: *běyedhôm* (5:8), *lēhôm* (5:9, 10), *lěkôm* (5:9), *šemāhāthôm* (5:10), *běṛā'sêhôm* (5:10). Especially important is the picture presented of Sheshbazzar as someone who not

only was governor (*peḥāh*) but also began the building of the temple, laying its foundations (5:14-16). This differs from the scenario given in Ezra 1-3 where Sheshbazzar's role is downplayed, nothing is said about his being governor, and the founding of the temple is done by Zerubbabel. It seems to me that this argues in favor at least of a different tradition and, likely, for the document's basic authenticity, especially when we add in the early nature of the linguistic criteria. Nevertheless, a couple of points are still problematic: v 9 has 'elders' as those in charge rather than the governor as should be expected (see discussion on Document 5); v 12 has Nebuchadnezzar instead of the more correct form Nebuchadrezzar.¹⁸

Document 4 (6:2-5): Decree of Cyrus

That some sort of decree was issued by Cyrus seems reasonable, especially if Document 3 is authentic. Nevertheless, several points in this decree militate against its trustworthiness. In 6:2 we read the later form *dikrônāh* when we should expect *zkrn*¹⁹; however, it is not clear whether this is a part of the document or only a heading given by the editor/compiler of Ezra 1-6. More important is the oddly proportioned temple in only two dimensions which apparently measures about 90 feet wide by 90 feet high but with no length (6:3). The Persians might allow the temple of this local cult to be rebuilt and even permit the temple vessels to be returned, but it seems unlikely that the Persian government would pay for the building (6:4). The form Nebuchadnezzar occurs in v 5 instead of Nebuchadrezzar. The way this document is attached to Document 5 is also problematic. Thus, if this has a genuine

¹⁸Cf. the form *nbwkdrsr* in *KAI 227* obv. 5.

¹⁹This heading is found on a Persian document from Elephantine (Cowley 32.1).

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document at the core, it has probably been revised by Jewish scribes and has perhaps also suffered textual damage in transmission.

Document 5 (6:6-12): Reply of Darius

Some portions of this letter fit with Document 3. For example, the governor (*paḥat*) of Judah is mentioned again (6:7), though it is qualified by the phrase “and elders”, while “elders” alone is used in the next verse (6:8). The mention of “elders” fits very much the bias of the compiler of Ezra, whereas the reference to a governor goes against it.²⁰ In addition, the directions to Tattenai to ‘get away from’ Jerusalem seem harsh when directed at an official of the king who is simply doing his duty (6:6). 6:8 appropriates money from the royal tribute to pay the expenses of building the temple. The penalty for hindering the Jews in vv 11-12 looks surprisingly drastic and suspiciously like what the Jews would want the king to say. In 6:11 an order is redundantly set a second time (despite v 8). The reference to the God who makes his name to dwell at Jerusalem (v 12) looks clearly Jewish (cf. Deut 12:11; 14:23; 16:2, 6, 11; 26:2). A late form is found in 6:6 (*ûkěñāwāthôn*); however, the early form in 6:9 (*lēhōm*) is interesting. It might be that the decree authorized regular offerings for the king in some form, which seems to be the intent of vv 9-10. The issuance of a royal authorization of building seems quite credible, especially if Document 3 is authentic as suggested above. If so, it seems to have been gone over by Jewish propagandists and not to exist in its original form.

²⁰See S. Japhet, ‘Sheshbazzar and Zerubbabel--Against the Background of the Historical and Religious Tendencies of Ezra-Nehemiah’, *ZAW* 94 (1982) 66-98; 95 (1983) 218-30.

Document 6 (7:12-26): Decree of Artaxerxes to Ezra

The first thing that strikes one about this decree is the amount of silver and gold made available to Ezra. First, gifts of silver and gold come from the king and his seven counsellors (7:15). Then Ezra is allowed to take all the gold and silver found in the province of Babylonia, along with the freewill offerings of the people (7:16). To this is added donations of vessels for God's house (7:19). Finally, just in case Ezra runs short of ready cash, he has the modest sum of 100 talents of silver available from the treasury for his "other needs" (7:20-23). By any calculation, there is an awful lot of wealth freely available to the Jewish community. In addition, the priests and Levites are exempted from tribute (7:24). The authority given to Ezra seems excessive (vv 25-26).²¹ We also have the strange statement that the king 'and his seven councillors' commission Ezra and give gifts. If there is anything which the Persian kings were not, it was modest. That Artaxerxes shared his authority with his councillors to the point of giving them credit in decrees seems unlikely.

When we look at the language, we find a strange situation. The early and later forms seem to alternate almost verse by verse: 7:16 *'ēlāhāhōm*; 7:17: *ûminḥāthôn*, *wēniskêhôn*, *'ēlāhākōm*; 7:18: *'ēlāhākōm*; 7:21: *yis'ālenkôn*; 7:24: *ûlēkōm*, *'ālêhōm*. Again, the early forms argue for an actual decree of Artaxerxes at the base of 7:12-26, but even if this is the case, the later forms suggest considerable scribal intervention. It would be difficult to say what the original decree authorized.

Conclusions

²¹For a further discussion, see my article, 'What Was Ezra's Mission?' in T. Eskenazi and H. K. Richards (eds.), *Second Temple Studies*, vol. 2 (Sheffield: JSOT Press, forthcoming in 1994).

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We can summarize the situation briefly:

1. The documents show a mixture of older and younger linguistic elements. This could suggest documents written later (forgeries), or original documents whose language and orthography have been updated by scribes, or original documents which have been considerably reworked at a later time. The first seems unlikely because the documents do not conform to Standard Literary Aramaic but in many cases show an older form of the language. The second may have happened in certain cases of orthography, such as *dy* instead of *zy*, but such is not likely to explain the preservation of older forms alongside younger nor does the pattern conform to that of either any known government documents from the Persian period or Standard Literary Aramaic. The third possibility would seem to be the best explanation on the linguistic side.

It might be asked whether the orthography is of any significance since it could be due purely to scribal error or assimilation during generations of copying. Such an explanation might explain a few of the late forms. It is not very likely the explanation for early forms, however, since scribes are more likely to introduce late forms into early texts than the other way round, nor can it explain the pattern of early and late forms found in the documents as a whole. Scribes may make sporadic changes by accident or systematic changes to update texts. They are hardly likely to have created the mixture of early and late forms found in the documents.

2. Although the contents often fit the Achaemenid period and government, in a number of cases they appear quite suspect. Were they forgeries produced by an individual clever enough to use authentic Old Persian material? Or do they represent original documents but with editorial intervention?

The two foregoing points suggest that the compiler of Ezra had available original Persian documents part or even all of the time but

that he or a prior tradent worked these over for apologetic or theological purposes or even to support claims made by the Jewish community to the Persian administration.

Some qualifications need to be made here. The first is that this has been only a brief investigation while the subject clearly requires considerable more study. At times, some strong correlation seems to be found between authentic sections of the documents and the presence of older linguistic elements. Indeed, it is interesting that the narrative in which the documents are imbedded has only late forms, except for 5:3-5 which can be explained as having been more or less copied from 5:9-10. At the moment, however, I am cautious as to whether things are so simple. Another caveat is that we can only make decisions on the data we have, not the data we may unearth tomorrow. New discoveries may confound all current theories. A further point is that all theories and arguments of authenticity are matters of probability. Some may find it perfectly believable that Ezra managed to extract 3 1/2 metric tons of silver from the Persian government. Most scholars, though, would find this a bit hard to accept.

I have given some serious reasons why it is unlikely that all the documents are authentic in their present form. Nevertheless, there are also reasons to reject Torrey's and Gunneweg's idea that they are complete fabrications from a later age.²² Although it is difficult to prove authenticity beyond doubt or to eliminate the possibility of clever forgeries, the hypothesis of complete invention does not seem the best explanation of the data. It is possible that one or two documents are a fabrication, albeit probably a fairly early one, but I suspect that what we generally have are authentic documents which have been reworked by Jewish scribes to a lesser or greater extent.

If this is the case, the problem of evaluating them is an acute

22C. C. Torrey, *Ezra Studies* (1910; reprint New York: Ktav, 1970), especially pp. 140-47; Gunneweg, *Esra* (n. 2 above).

one. A scribe can doctor up one document considerably without changing the overall message, while another may have made only a couple of relatively minor changes yet with the result that the document then says something quite different from the original. After this brief investigation, the most that can be done is to attempt to rank the documents in order of credibility. I would put Document 3 as most believable and the Hebrew Cyrus decree of 1:2-4²³ as the least, with the others ranging between these two.

²³The authenticity of the Hebrew decree has been defended by E. J. Bickerman, 'The Edict of Cyrus in Ezra 1', *Studies in Jewish and Christian History* (AGAJU 9; Leiden: Brill, 1976) 1.72-108 = partial revision of *JBL* 65 (1946) 244-75. For a summary of his arguments and criticisms of them, see my *Judaism from Cyrus to Hadrian*, 35.